





# BAUDRILLARD ON TERRORISM

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For Baudrillard, the attacks on the World Trade Center were the first and the last symbolic event of global significance. With the World Trade Center, terrorism destroyed the center of Western imperialism that existed worldwide.

The terrorist events thereafter have not reached this dimension, they have only accelerated further and further, so that it would actually be time for the system to decelerate long ago or to get out of the game. But the opposite is the case: “All the speeches and commentaries express a gigantic abreaction to the event itself and the fascination it exerts. The moral condemnation, the holy alliance against terrorism corresponds to the astonishing triumph of witnessing the destruction of this global superpower, or better: of seeing it destroy itself, committing suicide in consummate form. For it has itself, by its intolerable power, fomented not only all this violence of which the world is filled, but also, without knowing it, that terrorist imagination which dwells in all of us.” (Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 12).

Even more, as the posts on social media show, terrorism has not only put into practice the (night)dream of those who dwell in comfort zones of the exorcism of evil, it has rather become even more the catalyst of a collectively orchestrated wave of hyper-narcissists who camouflage themselves only makeshiftly with their expressions of sympathy on social networks. These hyper-narcissists do not dream of the destruction of a power that has become hegemonic, as represented by Western imperialism; rather, in their delusion of practicing the exorcism of evil, they are themselves driven by evil: Hence the whole delusion of the exorcism of evil: because it is there, everywhere, like an obscure object of desire. Without this profound complicity of the Western saturated, the event would not have the resonance it has in every attack, and the terrorists know perfectly well in their symbolic strategy that they can count on this complicity, which can never be admitted.

Baudrillard writes: “This goes far beyond the hatred that the disinherited and exploited, those who have ended up on the dark side of the world order, feel toward the dominant world power. This malignant desire is also in the hearts of those who benefit from this world order. Fortunately, the allergy to any definitive

order, any definitive power is a universal phenomenon, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were a perfect embodiment of this definitive order precisely in their twin nature.

There is no need here for any death or destruction instinct, not even for any perverse effect. It is perfectly logical and inevitable that the constant increase of power of a power also increases the desire to destroy it. And this power is the accomplice of its own destruction. When the two towers collapsed, one had the impression that they responded to the suicide attack from the air with their own suicide. It was once said, "God himself cannot declare war." Oh yes he can. The West, having taken the position of God (the position of divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy), becomes suicidal and declares war on itself" (ibid.13).

Today, Western imperialism has concentrated all power, all functions in its financial machines, its technocratic apparatuses, and its totalitarian thinking, and thus, for Baudrillard, it has only created the objective conditions for the brutal policies of the terrorists. Western imperialism imposes its rules of the game on everyone without exception and reserves for itself all the means to govern the globe, so that the terrorists have nothing left but to change the rules of the game in their own way, which ultimately consist only in the willingness to react with the last, the irreplaceable weapon, namely to pay with their own death.

Terrorism today, according to Baudrillard, is in a sense everywhere. It spreads like viruses. Evil, according to Baudrillard, has gone viral. It spreads unnoticed around the world, without a clear line that would allow it to be identified. Terrorism today, as a viral epidemic, has become even more perfectly protected and even more unpredictable than the September 11 attackers were. And evil has gone viral insofar as it is inside Western imperialism itself: "A phantom enemy is emerging,

spreading across the planet, seeping in everywhere like a virus, penetrating all the crevices of power” (ibid. 20).

Western imperialism has by no means virtually reached its limits with its planetary monetary capital excursions and flows, as Baudrillard assumes, and yet, like a Pavlovian dog, it fights every imaginable antagonism. But already against the virality of terrorism his means seem to be limited, he does not only resort to the means of war for his self-defense, but pushes his media propaganda machines further and further, which, however, suffocate themselves in their simultaneously generated rollback or are cleverly used by the terrorists, in which they simply reverse the Manichaeism fundamentalism, according to which there is not only the God money, but also the authentic God, whereby God is always with them. Within the framework of this Manichean worldview, Obama, too, saw himself afflicted by God and challenged in his faith from the very beginning, and Western imperialism responded with further excesses of financial capital, power and technologies, with the expansion of comfort zones for the elites and parts of the middle classes, and everything now trades as the representation of the good. But this progress of the good, its circulation in all fields (science, capital, technology, democracy, human rights) does not correspond at all to a defeat of evil, because, according to Baudrillard, good and evil today always go together simultaneously and reinforce each other in the same reciprocal movement.

But that is by no means all; Western imperialism and its supposed leftist opponents today, as Andrew Culp has pointed out in *Dark Deleuze*, are drowning in an orgy of affirmation. In an era of banal appeals, market slogans, and advertising, however, it feels strange to be affirmative and constructive. You know the slogans and sayings, “If you don’t have anything kind to say, you’d better not say anything at all,” “if constructive thoughts are spread, it will have positive consequences,” or simply, “be constructive, not destructive.” In reality, this

positivity, which Han calls the violence of the same and Baudrillard calls the obesity of the system, itself has something inherently destructive, purely accumulative and comatose, culminating either in collective infarction or at least in a pervasive strange mood; melancholy within, blended with a lot of madness on the surface. One gawks, communicates and designs until unconsciousness.

The affirmation must be read as a simple more. This view is based on the principle of accumulation, which lacks a theory of exploitation and does not even consider the power of interruption. The most powerful system of autoproduction is capital itself, which on a global scale simultaneously throws hundreds of millions of people into poverty and produces a vast surplus population that is denied even the right to sell its labor power, that incites wars of devastation and subjects subjects to meticulous systems of control. Even in the core zones of capital, a surplus proletariat has long been emerging that is too poor to be indebted and too rich to be incarcerated.

With its global policy of extermination, which particularly affects the world's youth, Western imperialism is virtually driving terrorism out of itself.

Or, to put it in the words of Baudrillard: "Until now, the integrating power had largely succeeded in absorbing and reabsorbing every crisis, every negativity, creating a deeply desperate situation (not only for the damned of this earth, but also for the wealthy and privileged in their radical comfort). The fundamental event is that the terrorists have stopped committing suicide completely in vain, that they have brought their own death into play in an offensive and effective way, according to a strategic intuition that simply recognizes the immense fragility of the enemy, the fragility of a system that has reached its near-perfection and is immediately vulnerable at the slightest spark. They have succeeded in making their own death an absolute weapon against a system that thrives on the



exclusion of death, whose ideal is the slogan “zero deaths.” Any system with “zero deaths” is a zero-sum game. All means of deterrence and annihilation are useless against an enemy who has already made his own death a weapon of counteroffensive. “What do we care about American bombardments! Our men are as eager to die as the Americans are eager to live!” That is why 7,000 dead in one fell swoop is so incomparably much when inflicted on a system that follows the slogan of “zero dead.”

In this way, then, what is always at stake here is death, not only the brutal incursion of death in real time and direct transmission, but also the incursion of a death that is more than real: a symbolic and a sacrificial death – that is, an absolute and irrevocable event.

This is the spirit of terrorism.

Never to attack the system in the form of relations of forces. For that would be the (revolutionary) imaginary, imposed on one by the system itself, which survives only by making those who attack it fight on the field of reality, which will always be the terrain proper to the system. But instead of this, to transfer the struggle to the symbolic sphere, where the rule is that of challenge, of recoil, of surpassing. Just as death can only be answered by a death of equal or greater value. Challenge the system by a gift it cannot return except by its own death and collapse.”

We are dealing here with implosive catastrophes, similar to those of a physical system that implodes when it is too saturated and has a sufficient density, and analogously a totalitarian power implodes, reaches at a certain moment the state of total saturation and affirmation and collapses.

Dissemination, on the part of the imperialist powers, has led to a new logic of terror and counter-terror that no ideology or politics can control anymore, not

even a religion, even Islam cannot account for the “energy that feeds terror” (ibid.16). For Baudrillard, the terrorists set their brutal violence against the terror of the system, indeed their own asymmetrical terror invites the system to further radicalize and increase its repressive responses, but the asymmetry of violence renders Western imperialism defenseless, knowing only its own logic of capitalization and symmetrical power relations, and unable to enter the field of symbolic challenge and self-sacrifice.

The IS has long since appropriated all the technologies and instruments of Western capitalism, from (rudimentary) capital and stock market speculation, to information technologies and media. Baudrillard: “They have appropriated all the achievements of modernity and global civilization without losing sight of their goal, which is to destroy these very things” (ibid, 23). The terrorists have long since adapted the banality of everyday Western life and disappear into it before mutating, as if from nowhere, into living bombs, so that, conversely, ‘any individual can be suspected of being a terrorist by the seed, and thus, at the same time, the increased insecurity of the population can be advanced.

For Baudrillard, the sacrificial death of terrorists in real time and as a live transmission is an absolute and irrevocable event, indeed the absolute weapon against a system that represses death and whose slogan is “pacifism forever”. The transformation of struggle into spectacle means challenging the system on a field where it cannot respond except by accepting its own death, its own destruction. And this is what the terrorists aim at: The system is to “commit suicide in its turn in response to the multiple challenges of death and suicide” (ibid. 22).

Terrorism thus also refuses Western logic and its economic calculus: cause, proof, truth, reward, end, and means are, according to Baudrillard, the terms of value for



money by which death is valued, though the terrorists are not willing to pay the price; rather, they have broken this economic paradigm, which Adorno sees in the universality of the principle of exchange. Terrorism has created a zone where exchange is impossible and is replaced by singularity in the form of suicide. Terrorism is as abysmally immoral as capital itself, no less so than globalization. Therefore, what counts today is only the event that happens in counterplay to abstract universality, and this includes Islam, since it presents itself as an alternative to Western values.

Western imperialism can only suggest to destroy terrorism, and nobody can even guess where and when the repression, the police surveillance, the control up to the security terror of the system will finally end. And from the habits and everyday life of the population the idea of freedom has long disappeared, rather the system itself will approach a brutal and at the same time subtle techno-fundamentalism, and this is for Baudrillard the true victory of terrorism.

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